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COVER STORY

Some people vilified him, some defended him. Everybody watched. And in the heat of the chase after the juicy details, right-wing axe-grinders played the liberal media like a violin

Devil, angel, mere human?

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CNN covered the interview between Clinton and Starr as a sporting event, with a "game clock" ticking off the long minutes; after several hours, unable to keep track of the "timeouts" each man took, it was eventually scrapped.

Then Clinton went on TV to admit his relationship with Lewinsky was "not appropriate ... I misled people, including even my wife." He also rapped Starr for "prying into private lives."

The press went ballistic.

"He didn't come clean," roared Donaldson, in an unfortunate use of words. "I'm not so sure he's come to terms yet with how much he has soiled his own presidency," wrote Jonathan Alter of Newsweek, the magazine whose prurience soiled investigative journalism (not to mention the grand tradition of muckraking).

When Clinton expanded on his apology – telling religious leaders "I don't think there is a fancy way to say I have sinned" – the pundits mocked him for his "apology tour." (He could've been Kurt Cobain: "I feel stupid and contagious.") One called him "a pig and a cad and a selfish brute," another dubbed him a "moral pygmy." These weren't Rush Limbaugh clones foaming at the mouth; these were liberals, Clinton's contemporaries. Maybe they were purging themselves of the media's "don't ask, don't tell" legacy on the sex shenanigans of Clinton's hero JFK. They sure as hell weren't gonna give him a free ride just because he was "one of us."

"So what should we do with the 'Big Creep' (Monica's nickname for him) now? 'Moving on,' as Clinton hopes, is not possible," Alter stated in a twisted kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Censure, he recommended, would "officially punish and shame a president without paralyzing the country with porn."

But recent research suggests that porn flicks outnumber Hollywood releases by 15 to 1, much of them screened in the cozy confines of suburbia where they're known as a "sex aids."

If polls showed many Americans getting their news from late-night comedy monologues, there was plenty to chew on. Among Jay Leno's jokes: "It came out today that Clinton once tried to have phone sex with Hillary, but she said, 'Not tonight, I have an earache.'" Or: "Monica is considering suing the president. She wants a million dollars for pain and suffering and $2.50 for dry-cleaning." Time magazine dubbed him the nation's "Libido in Chief."

Columnist and TV personality George Will harped on "the national longing" to be rid of Clinton. Folks were said to suffer from "Clinton Fatigue." Yet the pundits admitted that if Clinton had the opportunity to run for a third term, he'd win hands down. Why? Never underestimate the power of sex appeal.

When Hustler publisher Larry Flynt threatened to expose House speaker-elect Robert Livingston's multiple extramarital affairs over a decade, Newsweek solemnly swore, "It was a measure of the insanity that one of the most feared men in Washington these days is a Beverly Hills pornographer." The "insanity" was how the sex-obsessed mainstream media dressed up pornography as news. Who was hurling whom?

VII. Feminists

"I put a spell on you, because you're mine."
– Screamin' Jay Hawkins, 1956

A verdict on Clinton's sex life was eagerly awaited from feminists (or "femi-Nazis" in Rush Limbaugh's widespread term). "Why is Clinton Getting a Free Pass from Feminists?" asked columnist Richard Cohen. Paula Jones's adviser Susan Carpenter-McMillan cackled, "I've watched the women's movement, who tripped over their pantyhose to defend Anita Hill, suddenly go mute."

The New York Times ran an editorial decrying an op-ed piece it had published two days earlier by Gloria Steinem, who said that sexual harassment and consensual sex were not the same thing.

The Times's reaction intrigued Susan Faludi, author of the best-selling Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women. Feminists are accused of being "rigid sex police," she wrote, but when Steinem arrived with a "nuanced and nonpolemical" statement, it turned out that editorialists saw "sexual encounters in Victorian terms ... All men in heat are a 'danger' to all women, who are evidently never in heat.

"Seeing all women as mortally vulnerable to any sexual approach is the flip side of the coin from seeing all women as something to harass and molest sexually – both rely on a presumption of female frailty.

"Many male opinion-makers are willing to go along with the feminists as long as they stick to the old playbook, framing all sexual encounters as

The Clinton family, all smiles and kisses last summer, at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. RON EDMONDS, AP

ravishments ... Women no longer see themselves as the preservers of female chastity; they no longer think of themselves as bad girls for having sexual desires ..."

The pundits, she continued, "replace candor and analysis with clichéd morality plays that don't begin to describe real human sexual experience."

Faludi's capper: "If only some men would learn to be a little less hysterical."

VIII. Black and blue

"I will be your knight in shining armour. I will come to your emotional rescue."
– The Rolling Stones, 1980

The Clintons in the mid-1970s. FROM GAZETTE FILES

Among Clinton's staunchest defenders were black Americans. Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison called Bubba "the first black president of the United States," because of his lynching over sex. John Conyers, chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, said, "Impeachment was designed to rid this nation of tyrants and traitors, not attempts to cover up extramarital affairs."

Naturally, rock'n'rollers came to his defence. (Duh.) Rolling Stone's Wenner charged that there'd been an attempted "coup d'état." Patti Smith: "When I look at the crucifixion of Clinton, I look at the crucifixion of my generation." Rapper DMX: "All he did was get some pussy, you know what I'm saying! ... Men are dogs. The fronting ones are the ones who don't act like dogs. Those are the ones you watch."

Maybe it's all a matter of taste.

Dominick Dunne, chronicler of the social set's unsolved mysteries for Vanity Fair, wrote in May "By that Clinton was "an electrifying presence, the greatest I've ever seen, and I have been in rooms where Jack Kennedy electrified."

But Dunne got a psychic jolt gazing wistfully at the Oval Office from behind the fence "when a really cheap thought popped into my head. I wondered if any of the president's semen had missed Monica's dress and spattered on to the carpet. It was that thought that did it for me. Recriminations, long harboured, erupted. He had trashed that office the way some rock stars trash hotel rooms. However you look at it, there was never any beauty or dignity in the Clinton-Lewinsky romance. This was no Edward VIII and Mrs. Simpson."

"Some people in our generation," wrote Esterbas, didn't want to hear the vulgarities of the Starr report "any more than they wanted to hear Public Enemy or Snoop Doggy Dogg. They wanted to hear Yanni or music made by mating whales or the Beatles Anthology. They wanted movies that were touchy-feely and gauze-lit. They wanted to see Spielberg, not Spike Lee ..."

Ted Koppel, scribbling in his recently published Off Camera: Private Thoughts Made Public, a diary of 1999, was "hard-pressed to think of a single act" by Clinton, throughout the Monica matter, "in which he put the nation's welfare ahead of his own." But how would journalism's Grand Poohbah possibly know of Clinton's less sexy measures – family leave, gun control, etc. – from watching his own show, Nightline, which focused on Monicagate?

Koppel had other matters on his mind, like the reasoning behind Jenny Craig hiring Monica Lewinsky for its weight-loss products. Dear Diary: "Is there some subtle undercurrent at work here? If the woman who performed fellatio on the president can lose 31 pounds on this diet, surely it will work for me. Or is it just as crass as it seems, that anyone with name recognition, no matter its source, is a useful tool of merchandising?"

IX. Puppy love

"When you touch me, I can't stand myself."
– James Brown, 1967

"Love," sang Mickey & Sylvia in 1957, "is strange." The morning Monica Lewinsky was testifying before the grand jury, Clinton wore the $100 silk Zegna tie she gave him. "When I see you wearing this tie," she told him, "I'll know that I am close to your heart."

The New York Times followed a Starr hot tip by suspecting the tie-wearing was "a plea for solidarity." Newsday thought it might be a White House threat that "she was being watched." Lewinsky only learned of the tie when she returned home and flipped on the evening news, thereby blowing these theories out of the water.

This got journalist Jack Hitt thinking. Writing in the online magazine Salon, he popped the question: "What if Bill and Monica were actually in love?" Even for just an itty-bitty moment, with the requisite achy-breaky hearts.

"What if Clinton wore the tie for no reason other than to communicate to Monica, after the ordeal of testifying, that 'I'm close to your heart'? ... And how about the 'Romeo and Julie' ad placed in the Washington Post on Valentine's Day by Monica? Assuming that Clinton wasn't looking for a dishwasher's job or wasn't out to buy a used El Camino, why would he be cruising the classifieds unless it had been prearranged by the two of them?"

And just nine days after his secretary, Betty Currie, frantically retrieved the gifts Clinton had given Lewinsky, he gave her a throw rug and a gold brooch. Why would he risk showering her with more gifts? Or risk leaving messages on her answering machine?

"They called it puppy love," sang Paul Anka. "Love," the Rolling Stones claimed, "is hot." "I'm just a prisoner of love," wailed James Brown.

He gave her Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman, which to a man of Clinton's generation, noted Hitt, is about "the beauty of rollicking carnality when it yearns to defy death, a book that signifies the elevation of old-fashioned lusty monkey-love as a plaintive reach toward immortality. For a liberal-arts dilettante such as Clinton, Leaves of Grass is the book that yokes the sacred and the profane into meaningful union. It's what you give your lover before you move on to a Henry Miller novel ..."

Lewinsky gave him Nicholson Baker's Vox, a book about phone sex which Hitt described as "a Gen-X attempt at signaling the same complex spiritual longings bound up in physical desire ... Leaves is hopeful, even defiant, whereas Vox has an almost tragic quality about it, an acknowledgment that the real world will never allow the couple's profanity to bloom into holiness."

All this was just too icky for the pundits to bear. They envisioned their 21-year-old daughters with someone old enough to be called Dad. Ew! Maybe that makes Catherine Zeta-Jones a "victim" of well-known sex addict Michael Douglas. Maybe they hadn't heard of forty-something women getting it on with 20-year-old bucks.

Devil or angel? Clinton tells Wired magazine that he gets a "big kick" being with "people who are younger than I am, who know things I don't know ... It kind of keeps me going, gets my juices going." Just over two weeks ago he told staff at an "I Survived the Clinton Presidency" party: "They may find someone who does this job as well as me, but I don't think they'll ever find someone who will have as much fun doing it."

X. The ballad of Bill and Hillary

"We're caught in a trap, I can't walk out. Because I love you too much, baby."
– Elvis Presley, 1969

We knew he was lying when – acting on the advice of his Hollywood adviser Harry Thomason – he jutted his jaw, clenched his teeth, stabbed the air with his finger, and uttered the fateful line, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Ms. Lewinsky." We knew this type of lie from the first time we got caught with our hand in the cookie jar. We knew. He was un-presidential – he was human.

Couples lie to each other every day – little white lies, big ol' whoppers – but their lies don't land on Page 1. By making Bill and Hillary's marriage Headline News, the media was at long last able to publicly humiliate them and – this is so rich – say he lied to the American people. The press contended that the curiosities of their marriage affected the public because they discussed policy together. Never mind that they were a new kind of couple, negotiating uncharted territory as equals. The press was stuck in the old role models, from Ike and Mamie to Ike & Tina. It was as if feminism never existed, let alone lowdown rock'n'roll.

"Most of the speculation about the marriage," Joe Klein wrote in the November New Yorker, "has tended to be an inferior grade of pop psychology; indeed, the safest course probably is to believe all the conflicting theories: that the marriage is contentious, political, marked by bouts of infidelity, passionate (in every sense of the word), loving, and certainly enduring. But it is also fair to observe that, despite – and sometimes, perhaps, because of – the inconsistencies in their marriage, the Clintons tend toward a united, myopic irrationality in moments of stress."

So Klein gets 6 have it all, with a smug Cheshire cat smile to boot. But "myopic" to describe the instinctive protectiveness of all couples who've been together for awhile? Doesn't the word better describe the MO of the press with sex-sex-sex on the brain? Couples across America looked at each other and said, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

In a piece titled Adultery written at the height of the Lewinsky scandal for Critical Inquiry magazine, Laura Kipnis said that "What is so ordinary and accepted as to go quite unnoticed in all of this is simply that a toxic level of everyday unhappiness or grinding boredom is the functional norm in many lives and marriages; that adultery; in some fumbling way, seeks to palliate this, under conditions of enforced secrecy that dictate behaviour ranging from bad to stupid to risky to deeply unconscious; and that shame, humiliation, and even ruin accompany the public exposure of this most ordinary of circumstances. Just 'wanting to feel alive' or 'young,' 'wanting a little excitement,' 'wanting a change,' spells downfall."

Canadians turned a corner decades ago when Pierre Elliott Trudeau declared the state has no business in the nation's bedrooms. Americans have not been so fortunate.

"Privacy protects us from being misdefined and judged out of context in a world of short attention spans, a world in which information can easily be confused with knowledge," Jeffrey Rosen wrote in The Unwanted Gaze: The Destruction of Privacy in America, a wide-ranging look at our computer-and-media era that's the best book to come out of l'affaire Clinton.

"True knowledge of another person is the culmination of a slow process of mutual revelation," he continued. In order to flourish, it needs "space as well as time: sanctuaries from the gaze of the crowd ..."

As Lewinsky told prosecutors who confronted her with drafts of love letters, scavenged from her computer, that she had written to Clinton but never sent, "This is so wrong! Do you not understand that no one else is supposed to read this?"

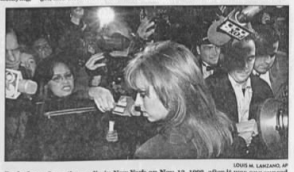
XI. Coda

"I'm too sexy for my shirt."
– Right Said Fred, 1992

Speculation runs rampant over Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton's presidential ambitions. Will she dump the ex-prez? Or will she count on his electrifying presence as a campaigner?

One thing's for sure: Elvis is leaving the building. He'll be down at the end of Lonely Street in Heartbreak Hotel.

ROBERTO BOREA, AP
Monica Lewinsky in Washington in January 1999 after being interviewed by House prosecutors.



LOUIS M. LANZANO, AP
Paula Jones faces the media in New York on Nov. 13, 1998, after it was announced Clinton agreed to pay her $850,000 to drop her sexual-harassment lawsuit.

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